

R 130526Z JAN 09
FM AMEMBASSY SUVA
TO AMEMBASSY CANBERRA
AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY
AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON
HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
SECSTATE WASHDC 0947

C O N F I D E N T I A L SUVA 000013

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/13/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [FJ](#)

SUBJECT: AGEING BUT HEALTHY FIJI PRESIDENT PRAYS FOR
DEMOCRACY

Classified By: Ambassador C. Steven McGann for reason 1.4(C)

¶1. (C) Summary: Fiji President Iloilo, despite memory challenges likely caused by early Alzheimer,s disease, can be remarkably lucid and is well aware of the political situation in Fiji. Iloilo longs to retire but feels he must remain in office until a new government is elected, in order to prevent interim Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama from assuming the presidency. Iloilo,s suspicion is consistent with speculation that Bainimarama is considering a possible bid for the presidency or vice-presidency as part of an election deal. End summary.

Healthy but forgetful

¶2. (C) Eighty-eight year old Fiji President Ratu Josefa Iloilovatu Uluivuda recently returned from his annual Australian medical checkup. According to Dr. Joji Malani (protect), his personal physician who accompanied him on the trip, President Iloilo is quite healthy for his age despite some minor health issues. When asked about Iloilo,s mental acuity, Malani acknowledged a very slight decrease in ability over the previous year. He said Iloilo has difficulty with his short-term memory and probably suffers from early Alzheimer,s. He noted that on this trip Iloilo often asked him the exact same questions every five minutes or so, but he added that the president can also be surprisingly alert and cognizant of events and issues, especially when public decorum is needed.

No Parkinson's

¶3. (C) When asked if Iloilo suffered from Parkinson,s disease, as had been reported in some circles, Malani said he does not. More than a year ago, when Iloilo came to him with visible hand shakiness, Malani diagnosed him with familial tremors. Iloilo responded well to treatment and the associated body tremors/shakiness ceased. Malani said that Iloilo,s heart is in surprisingly good condition and that the only obvious recent deterioration in health is a substantial calcification of the spinal column in the neck and growing arthritis in both knees, which is making it painful for Iloilo to move around.

Staying close to home

¶4. (SBU) Iloilo had planned original to attend a royal invitation to England in November and then to travel on to Australia, but Malani convinced him that traveling farther than Australia was unwise. (Note: The Embassy had processed visas for Iloilo and his entourage for a proposed stopover in Los Angeles.)

Praying for Democracy

¶5. (C) Malani admitted that Iloilo is fairly powerless as "others" make the major decisions in the presidential office. However, Malani said that Iloilo made it quietly clear that he is aware of Fiji,s political situation and deeply wishes Fiji to return to parliamentary democracy as soon as possible. Malani confessed surprise by this as Iloilo supported coup leader Frank Bainimarama and the

interim government in the year following the December 2006 military coup. He reported that Iloilo and his wife, who are devout Methodists (Fiji,s largest and most influential denomination), regularly pray for a speedy return to democracy. According to Malani, Iloilo no longer enjoys his work and is ready to retire but wants to hang on through elections lest his departure open the way for Bainimarama to assume the presidency prior to a poll.

Comment

¶6. (C) Ambassador McGann,s experience during the presentation of his credentials in early November tracks with Malani,s assessment. Given what he had heard previous to his visit, Ambassador was surprised by the clarity of his talk with Iloilo. Ambassador was taken when, as he rose to depart, Iloilo asked his staff why tea was not being served to the Ambassador to extend the visit.

¶7. (C) Under Fiji,s 1997 constitution, Iloilo,s presidential powers are limited. Some have surmised that Iloilo,s younger wife, Adi Salaseini Kavunono Ulivuda, calls the shots in collaboration with Presidential Office Permanent Secretary Rupeni Nacewa. Anyone who wishes to speak to Iloilo must go through Nacewa, who was close to Bainimarama before the military coup. The recent expulsion of the New Zealand Acting High Commissioner was tied partially to the denial of a student visa for Nacewa,s son to continue his medical studies in New Zealand. The expulsion may have been a way for Bainimarama to demonstrate his reciprocal loyalty to Nacewa.

¶8. (C) Despite the president,s wishes, Nacewa would likely support any Bainimarama attempt to succeed Iloilo. Although Bainimarama earlier disbanded the Great Council of Chiefs, which has the authority to select Fiji,s president, he recently has courted the chiefs and gained some traction. Iloilo,s suspicion is consistent with speculation that Bainimarama is considering a bid for the presidency or vice-presidency as part of an election deal, in which scenario Bainimarama would retain significant influence over an elected government. End Comment.

MCGANN